

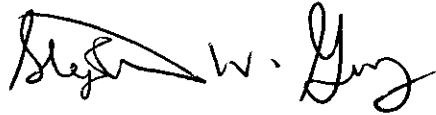
Act Like A Lady: How We Become Women

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Steve Guy

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steve W. Guy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steve" being more prominent and the last name "Guy" written in a similar style. The middle initial "W." is clearly visible between the first and last names.

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Abstract

While American girls of the twenty-first century enjoy more freedoms than their mothers and grandmothers could have ever thought possible, today's young women also face pressures and endure hardships unique to their generation. Indeed one cannot ignore the frightening truth that this nation's adolescent females battle eating disorders, engage in sexual encounters, and use drugs and alcohol long before they have had the chance to define themselves as women and adults. Young women deserve a nurturing environment as they shape their identities; however, few girls can find this safe community as the media, their peers, and even their parents lead them astray. I hope my collection of short stories will serve as a map to these impressionable girls as they assert themselves and attempt to find their ways to adulthood. While the road is dark and dangerous, I hope my stories shed light on their quests for self-worth and provide direction for their journeys towards womanhood.

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Elizabeth Greene

Everyone Else Around Here

I am dating a boy. On our first date he tells me that he is different. He says he wants to be different. He needs to be different. And I see that he is different, different from anyone I've ever met. I tell him this and he likes that I said it. I can tell because he says that he is proud to be different from everyone else. He isn't like them, he says, because he questions things. He isn't like them because he doesn't take things at "face value." He makes up his own mind, unlike everyone else around here.

He says that last part, "around here," in a harsh and bitter way. I can tell that he feels contempt for "around here," for this town. I can tell that he wants to be different because he can't stand the people around here. He tells me that he wants to get away. "Far away."

That's why he bought this car, he tells me as he opens the door for me to get inside. He's going to take me to the Dairy Queen for milkshakes, but on the way he wants to tell me more about his car. He bought the car, he says, to leave. But he bought this particular car because it reminded him of himself. He says that, like him, it's "missing something."

I don't ask what's missing because I know that he's going to tell me anyway, and he does. He says that when he first saw the car he almost cried because it was so rusted and brown and old. He says that he is rusted and brown and old too, even though he's young. Like that car, no one wants him in this town either. That's why he bought it. But he also bought it because of the letters on the hood.

As he tells me this, we arrive at the Dairy Queen and get out of the car. He again opens the door for me and when I get out he leads me over to the hood of the rusted, brown, old car. There, he says, and points to the letters that used to spell "FORD." All that's left now are the "O" and the "R." He is proud of this "O" and "R" though, I can tell. He says when he bought it the hood said "FOR" but he "purposely removed" the "F" after he drove it home.

There is a silence after this statement and he looks at me. I can tell that I am supposed to see some significance in the remaining "O" and "R" but I don't know what. He tells me that he took off the "F" because he wanted the hood to read *OR*. Why *OR*, he says? Because *or* "represents choice." *Or* is the word that means that an alternative is available in any situation. When people have a choice the word *or* is always there, he tells me.

Obviously, he thinks this is deep because he pauses again to look at my face. He stares at me and I can tell that he is thinking. I wonder what he wants me to do or say, but then he starts to talk again. He says, everyone else around here misses that about the word "OR." I did too when I was younger, he says. He tells me that he used to think he had no choice. He thought he too had to be like everyone else. He had to go to bed early, try to get perfect grades, never say fuck, and always wear matching socks. Now he knows he has a choice. He wants to be different.

After a long silence, I tell him he is different. He is pleased but obviously angry again because of the people around here. He says everyone else doesn't see that there is a choice about living your life. When he tells everyone else about the car's "OR" they ask "Or what?" and walk away. It's because they don't "appreciate the choice," he says. He

asks me if I do. I say yes because I think that's what he wants me to say. I say yes because I think I do.

After he drops me off at the end of our date, I think about the "OR" on the rusted, brown, old car. Does everyone else around here really say "Or what?" When he told me the story I thought "Either/or." Why didn't I think "Or what?" Is it because I see the choice? Maybe it's because I am weird like him. Different like him. Different from everyone else around here.

Is that the way it works? Either you're different or you're not? What if I don't want to be different? What if I don't want to be the same? Maybe I need to get out of here, too. Maybe I should see him again.

Our second date was better than our first. She talked more. I think she understood the story about my car, but does she really know how I feel? I think she does because our second date was pretty good. She seemed more open this time and she actually kept up her end of the conversation. She is funny and sweet when she opens up. She is more like me when she opens up.

When she opens up, I think she is a lot different from everyone else around here. She doesn't try so hard to look good all the time like the other girls around here. She told me she hates that. Hates girls who wear so much make-up that you don't recognize them without it. Hates it when they wear it even when they're in gym class. They wear it to bed even, she says, but she doesn't. She never wears make-up and she never asks her dates to hold her purse when she has to go to the bathroom or leave a room at a party.

She would never ask a date to do that, or to go shopping with her. She says, I don't wear make-up, I don't carry a purse, and I don't shop with dates. I like that about her.

I also like that she isn't afraid to say bad things about everyone else around here. She isn't even afraid to show a trace of a smile when I say that I want to get out of this fuckin' town. When I told her that I wasn't afraid to say fuck, I knew that she wasn't afraid to hear me say it. I think she even likes it when I say it because she's different from everyone else around here.

She's different because when I told her we were going to go look at the stars on our second date, she thought it was a good idea. She says she likes to look at the stars. I told her that I do, too. She smiles. She likes to look at stars, but she doesn't like the way everyone else around here thinks she should know how to cook because she's a girl.

She says she hates to cook because she's no good at it. Because she doesn't want to be good at it. When I ask her why, she says because she's supposed to be good at it so she won't be. She doesn't like to sew either for the same reason. Or talk on the phone with girls about boys. Or act like she doesn't know about tools when she does. But she does like to look at the stars.

She tells me she's been thinking about what I said about my car. She says she wants to know if you have to be the opposite of everyone else around here to be a "conscious thinker." I say no but we agree that it's hard to be like everyone else around here and still be "your own person." Why is that? I don't know.

I can tell there's something more she wants to say to me, so I sit beside her and I stay quiet. I stay quiet and wait for her to tell me what she wants to say. I wait and I take her hand in mine because I know that when she tells me what she's thinking it will mean

that she trusts me. Trusts me enough to tell me something she has probably not told anyone else.

I wait and then she looks at me again and says that she wants to tell me the real reason why she hates make-up so much. The real reason, she says, is because she feels like she is lying when she wears it. I don't ask her to explain what she means because I know that she will when she can put it into words. I see that she is struggling so I wait again.

I feel like it's lying, she says, because when you wear make-up, you become something that you're not. Someone that you're not. Someone more beautiful. More physically beautiful anyway. You're wearing a mask when you put on make-up, and I always thought people who wore masks weren't being honest about who they really are, she tells me.

I want to be honest about myself, she says. I want to be honest about who I am and I just can't do that when I wear make-up. Why can't people just be honest about who they are? Why can't people just like me for who I am?

I know what she means.

We kiss tonight. We kiss under the stars. She was cold and I gave her my jacket and then we started kissing. She is nice to hold. She is warm beneath my arms. I like holding her. She doesn't pull away like other girls. She doesn't lead me on only to push me away. She is honest when she kisses. Her lips share her true feelings with my lips. She said she didn't play games like other girls and now I know that she doesn't. For the first time in a long time I feel like I am with someone who is real. Someone who is truly

honest and real. I want to kiss her again. I want her to send me more truths through her lips. Will she?

He kisses me. Or did I kiss him? I'm not really sure, but I like it. He is gentler than I thought he would be. His lips are soft on my skin. It feels like he is massaging my lips with his. It feels like something cool is sweeping over me. Cool but hot. I hope he kisses me again. And again.

It's weird that we start kissing in the most conventional way. He's so unconventional that I thought it would be different. Different like him. Honestly, I guess I thought he'd tell me he had a different way to think about kissing like he does with the word *or*. I thought he would show me a new way to be physical. But I guess in a way he did because he doesn't kiss like the other boys around here. He's different when he kisses because he doesn't try to see how far he can go. He doesn't try to put his hand up my shirt. He doesn't tell me he is excited so I can't say no to him. No, he isn't like that. That's why I like him. That's why I like his way of kissing.

We connect, he and I. I know we do. I can tell him things I can't tell everyone else around here. We talk a lot. Do you ever wonder why the people who can't play piano are the ones who flock to them? Do these people actually think that everyone else in the room wants to hear "Chopsticks" and "Mary Had a Little Lamb"? Do they think we will be impressed? I ask him this and he shrugs. He says he doesn't know why they do it. I know why.

I tell him they do it because they think they should. When you see a piano, your automatic reaction is to play, I say. You play it even if you don't know how. You play it even if everyone else knows how to play "Chopsticks" and "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or even Beethoven's "Für Elise." You play because you think to yourself that everyone else probably knows how to play and you're the only one who doesn't. You play it because you want to feel normal. You play because you believe you've achieved "normalcy" once you're done.

That's the problem with everyone else around here, he says. They don't know that you don't have to play "Chopsticks" to be a good person. We smile. We will never play "Chopsticks," I say. And I will never wear make-up. But we both know that none of it's true. We want to be different but can we really ever be?

I won't play "Chopsticks," I tell her. I won't play "Chopsticks" and I won't play piano. I'll play the trumpet, I say, or the clarinet. She laughs but I know she doesn't believe me. Do I even believe myself?

Or what?

She asked me today what I want to be. What I want to do. She says she doesn't know yet. But she doesn't have to know yet because she's younger than me. I have to know, though, because I'm going to graduate soon. What do I want to be?

I think I want to write but I don't know what about, I tell her. Maybe I'll write about my rusted, brown, old car. Maybe I'll write about the two of us. She blushes at

this. I don't know why, so I ask her why. Because I don't want people to know about everything we do and say, she tells me.

She's right. I don't want them to know either. Because they'll judge us. They'll think we're being different because we're trying to prove that we're capable of it. But we're not. We're being different because this is who we really are. I think.

Why do I want to be different? Maybe I do want to be different because I just want to piss people off. It's just that everyone else around here is so fucked up. Because everyone else around here doesn't realize that you don't have to be like everyone else. Someone has to show them that you have a choice, I tell her. Someone has to show them you don't have to go to bed early and try to get perfect grades and not say fuck and wear matching socks. And you don't have to play "Chopsticks," she says. I love her for saying that. I love her? Yes. I do. I love you, I say. I love you, she says. I love you.

He found out today that he got accepted to college. He got a letter in the mail. I am happy for him. College is really something special. It's really something. Everyone else around here goes to the technical school in the next town to study to be a "heating and cooling specialist" and then they come back and fix furnaces and air conditioners. Or they farm. But they always come back. No one seems to be able to stay away. Not for long anyway.

Not him, though. He's going to college. He's going to college to be a writer. He'll leave and he'll stay away. He'll do great things, I think. You will do well for yourself, I tell him. You will go far. Far away.

I've been thinking about this acceptance letter, he says. I've been wondering why this letter of acceptance is so important to me. Why is it so important? Why is it so important that some people that I don't even know think I'm good enough, he says. Good enough for their scholarships. Good enough for their time and attention.

Why is it that my future hinges on their acceptance, he says. My whole life I've been saying that I don't need other people to tell me that I'm good enough, but now that exact thing is what is making me happy. That exact thing is what makes my future possible. What makes my whole life go in a different direction from everyone else's around here.

But why do I suddenly want to be accepted? Why do I suddenly like being accepted? I like it because that's what everyone wants, he tells me. To be accepted. To be accepted and get other people's approval. Approval and acceptance are what everyone else around here lives for, he says. Just think about it, he says. Acceptance and approval are the reasons why we do everything we do. Maybe even I need them.

He gets quiet for a long time after he says this and then I can tell that he is confused about what he really thinks. Then he asks me the strangest question. Have you ever tasted something really bad and then made someone else taste it, too? Yes, I say. That's what I mean about needing acceptance and approval. When you taste something and it's bad, why don't you just throw it out? You don't just throw it out because you want someone else to say it's bad, too, he tells me. You need someone else to say it's bad, too.

Like when the milk goes bad, he says. When the milk goes bad, you know it's bad, the expiration date says it's bad, but you still want someone else to taste it or to

smell it. To agree with you. To accept your decision. To approve of your judgment to throw it out. But why do we do this? Why do we need this? Why can't we just throw out the milk? Why can't we just pour it down the drain, pitch the carton, and never think about it ever again? Why do we need to make an issue out of spoiled milk?

It's possible that acceptance and approval are what our whole lives are about, he says. Everything comes down to those two things. Smelling the milk, making the decision, and getting someone else to tell you that you did the right thing. Making the choice and then making sure everyone else is okay with the consequences that follow. That's what it's all about, he says. Maybe, he says.

Is it, though? Is it really? What if he hadn't been accepted to college? What if he hadn't driven that rusted, brown, old Ford?

I've been thinking about the spoiled milk, he tells me. I don't think it's so much about approval and acceptance anymore. I don't think it's about getting someone else to agree with you. It's about having someone to "share the experience" with. Maybe it's just about having someone else there. Someone who understands you and understands the experience. Someone who can appreciate what you're going through, he says. Someone who knows what spoiled milk smells like and what fresh milk tastes like. Maybe it's about that instead. It may be, I tell him.

Either he is a writer or his life is worth nothing. Either I am completely different from everyone else around here or I am just like them. Either he leaves forever or he stays and hates his life and himself. Is life only about either/or? Does life work this

way? Does it work in such extremes? Surely it doesn't. Surely it can't because if he can't find himself here then he will never find himself anywhere.

I need you, I tell her. I need you even though I say I don't. I do need someone to approve of me. I do need someone to taste and smell things when I think they are bad. And when they are good, I tell her. I need someone to "share experiences with," I say. I need to play "Chopsticks." I fucking need to play fucking Chopsticks" as loud as I fucking can. I need to fucking play it until my fucking fingers hurt and my fucking eardrums explode.

And I need to wear matching socks. I need to wear matching fucking socks, I say. I need to go to bed early and try to get perfect grades and stop saying fuck and wear matching fucking socks. I need to wear matching socks and play "Chopsticks." And, I say, you need to wear make-up. Lots of make-up. So much fucking make-up that I can't tell who you are. You should wear it when you cook, I tell her, when you fucking cook and sew.

Here, I'll hold your purse. You should always carry one to keep your make-up in. You should carry a purse and my socks should always match, I say. And I'll never say fuck again and I'll always play "Chopsticks" and I'll ask "Or what?" I'll say "Or what?" and you'll say "Or nothing."

I love you and I need you. I love you and I need you and I need matching socks. I love you and I need you and I need to never be different again. It's easy to say you're different but it's hard to be different, I tell her. It's easy to say that it's easy to be alone but it's hard to be alone... and different. And I hate my car, I say. I hate my fucking old,

brown, rusted car. But I love you. I love you and I need you. I love you and I need you and I need this town, I scream.

And then I stop talking. I have to because I'm crying and I don't want her to know. I try to turn away from her but she looks at me hard. She looks me right in the eye and I can't turn away. I can't break away from her glance. Then she finally speaks. No, you don't, she tells me. You don't need any of it anymore because you admitted it. You admitted it. I admitted it. And I know she's right.

Would I have fallen in love with him if he had driven a Chevy? Would I have thought the question "Or what?" was ridiculous if I had never had that milkshake with him? Would I be the person I am if I had never known him? Or what?

I met someone. Someone at school. She is like me yet very different from anyone I've ever met. She says she likes being different. She has to be different to show everybody on this campus that it's possible. Possible to be different. She says everybody on this campus is just alike. They don't understand how freeing it is to be different. It's because they're all too afraid, she tells me. Afraid to be different.

She says that unlike everybody on this campus, she doesn't try to cover up her differences. She tries to stand out just to piss them off. But everybody on this campus covers up their differences as if being different is some kind of crime.

She says that their cover-up is like when you fold a piece of paper in half so you can't see the inside anymore. Then you fold that in half to conceal something else. Pretty soon the paper is a fourth of its original size and then an eighth and then a

sixteenth. And then finally it's just a wrinkled up wad. A sorry shriveled-up shell of what it once was. Of what it used to be. What it was and still is intended to be.

But it's worse than that, she tells me. It's worse than just a wrinkled up wad. It's worse than just an attempt to cover things up, she says. Because it's also about a need to be something you can never be. To do something impossible. We fold and fold but we still reveal ourselves, she says, and I can tell she's getting excited. As she talks, her voice grows louder and louder. Her anger also grows stronger and stronger. I listen to her words but it's her anger I really hear.

We can't possibly fold away all of our idiosyncrasies, she says. We can't possibly be the perfect person who seems perfect to everyone. We can't possibly cover up everything we truly are. Hell, we can't even fold any piece of paper eight times, she says. Eight times.

We sit quietly for a long time after that. I think about folding and what it really means. After a while she speaks again. But seven folds, somehow, never seems like enough, does it? Seven folds aren't enough, I tell her. I know, she says and she grows calmer. Her voice is suddenly very quiet.

Or maybe, on the other hand, even one fold is one too many, I say. Or, I say... But I don't finish my sentence. I become lost in my thoughts and, for a brief moment, I forget where I am. For a split second, I think I'm back in my old, brown, rusted Ford looking at the stars with her. But then I remember. I remember I am here and she is there. She is there, I think. And then I hear the angry voice again. It pulls me back to the present. Or what, it is saying. Or what?

What are the ribbons for?

“The girl got reasons... They all got reasons.”

– Stone Temple Pilots

Amelia has ribbons on her book bag. One of them, the pink one, is for breast cancer research and awareness. The other one, the purple one, is to stop violence against women and girls. I don’t just happen to know this, though. Amelia told me. She tells everyone who asks, in fact, and she tells anyone who doesn’t, too.

You see, Amelia is an interesting girl. She talks louder than the other girls in our class. She seems to like to hear herself yell. It’s almost as though she enjoys being mad or feels strangely excited by the bitterness so evident in her voice. Amelia seems to be excited by the anger she generates in general. And she is angry about a lot of things. But mainly because she believes she is viewed by society as a second-class citizen just because she is a woman. Excuse me, what I meant to say is that she is a “womyn.” Amelia isn’t a “woman” because that word was derived from the word “man,” you know? I do know now that I know Amelia.

But I’m not being fair. Amelia really isn’t so bad. She isn’t always crusading for the “cause” and screaming about saving the world. Although her book bag is covered with an assortment of ribbons and pins that make her feel strong, bold, and, above all, enraged, she is soft and gentle like other girls when she wants to be. When she feels safe,

she is much more feminine than you would think she could be. One day, I even saw her cry.

Yes, Amelia and I have been friends for a while now. We do a lot of stuff together. I even went to this protest rally with her once. I like Amelia.

Sometimes I find myself wanting to kiss Amelia. I wonder what it would be like. I wonder if I would become outspoken and brash like she is or if she would turn into a passive woman like me. Maybe my lips would awaken the beautiful, quiet woman inside her who is sick of yelling all the time. Just think, my magical kiss could set her free.

I often wonder if I am in love with Amelia. Sometimes, however, I definitely know that I am not. Amelia has always been a mystery to me, though. She is everything most women are too afraid to be. Or perhaps she is the epitome of what no woman should ever become.

Amelia's book bag makes me think of my mother. My mother raised four sons to be exactly like her husband, my father. But then she had me and threw up her hands. "What do you do with a girl?" she asked the doctor when I was born. Yes, my mother is everything Amelia is not: docile, self-sacrificing, dutiful, uncomplaining. In short, she can't define herself unless it's in relation to her husband or her children.

For my mother, our home is everything. She isn't political and she isn't "deep." If it can't be summed up in needlepoint on a neat little cushion, she doesn't want to hear about it. Likewise, if it doesn't affect the sanctity of her living room, it doesn't concern her. In short, my mother's life ambition seems to be packing lunches and mopping floors. I remember the day I asked my mother if she had ever had dreams about a career

of her own. I was in third grade and my teacher told me that I could be anything I wanted to be. Intoxicated by this news, I rushed home and informed mother that I wanted to be a famous writer.

“That’s nice,” she told me in a voice that lacked sincerity or interest.

“I’m going to be a writer and write about exotic places and famous people and travel all over the world,” I explained waiting for her to join in my excitement.

“Sure you are, dear.”

“What did you want to be when you were my age?”

“I don’t know, honey. That was such a long time ago.”

“Surely there was something you dreamed about. Did you want to be a writer too?”

“I guess I just didn’t think about careers all that much,” she told me as she absently stared at the fireplace.

“So you always wanted to be a mother then? My teacher told us that some women just want to have children instead of jobs.”

“I think the mantle looks a little dusty,” she said

I never tried to talk to her about my future after that. In fact, I don’t talk to her about much of anything really. I have ceased to try to interact with her beyond a superficial level. It’s not that I don’t appreciate my mother; I mean I am grateful for our clean home and warm meals. It’s just that I have failed too many times to connect with her. Believe me, you’d stop trying to talk too if every time you had a conversation it ended in a fight. So we both stopped fighting a long time ago. We both stopped apologizing, too.

I remember this one time my mother gave me the silent treatment for three days because I refused to wear my hair the way she wanted me to. It was school picture day and I was in the sixth grade. My mother insisted that I wear a ribbon in my hair. I had this red sweater and she bought me a ribbon that perfectly matched it. When I told her I was not going to wear the stupid ribbon, she told me I was acting like a child. She even told me I was trying to look like a boy. I never wore the ribbon, though. When my father came home, he told my mother she was being silly over something that didn't really matter. She was so defeated she couldn't bring herself to acknowledge me for three days.

I feel kind of bad about the ribbon now. I know I hurt her feelings over something that was so small. I should have just thanked her for it and put it in my hair. But because I thought it was an insignificant detail, I fought her on it instead.

It wasn't trivial to my mother, though. I could hear her crying in the kitchen after my father told her to drop it. It was just a ribbon to me but it became a reminder of humiliation for her. Humiliation and alienation from her own daughter and husband. I still hate that I made her cry even though I stopped really feeling anything for her a long time ago.

Before my mother and I stopped trying to get along, I dated this boy who drove a Ford. My mother never really liked him. I could sense her disdain every time I tried to talk to her about him. She didn't have to tell me in words that she didn't approve. Some things you hear anyway.

No matter what my mother thought, I liked the boy with the Ford. At one time, I even thought I was in love with him because of the way we connected with one another. It was almost like we didn't have to speak when we were together. Instead we only needed to look at each other in a certain way or touch each other at a certain time and we could perfectly express anything and understand what was being conveyed. He and I had that special kind of communication few will ever share. We shared it, though, he and I.

My mother told me that I couldn't possibly be in love with him because we were still too young to know what love is. She probably thinks love is a state that is accompanied by a sense of duty and acute pain.

I've never told Amelia about him, but I know what she would tell me. She, too, would try to convince me that I wasn't in love. However, she would argue from a very different angle, probably tell me I was confusing love with enslavement and with the kind of servitude my mother has given herself over to with my father. And then she would tell me that there is no use in following some man around when I could be pursuing my own dreams and shaping my own identity instead of wasting my life away.

I know she would say these things – probably even in those words – because I know Amelia better than she knows herself. I know what she's going to say before she says it. Before she even knows she's going to speak.

But I was in love. And I was loved in return. We never actually said it, but it was always understood. I know this no matter what anyone says.

The day I met Amelia, I knew I would fall in love with her. There was something about her that drew me to her. I think it was because that first time we talked she told me I was smart. No one had ever told me that before. No one had ever looked me straight in the eye and given me such a compliment.

I had never known anything like that. But, then again, I had never been around anyone like Amelia. It seems like there is so much passion and force behind her every word. My mother's words, on the other hand, are boring and flat. All she ever says is "Yes, dear," and "No, dear," and "Let me do that for you, dear." She makes me sick sometimes the way she silently polishes the silver and jumps at the chance to sew buttons back on our shirts without one complaint or rebellion. It's like my mother is some mute robot slave and Amelia is this goddess who doesn't just speak but instead brilliantly declares every energized and powerful word that flows off her tongue.

But sometimes when I prefer my mother's quiet approach to things. Like the way she used to always cut the crust off my oldest brother's bread because one time he mentioned that he didn't care for the crust on toast. She never expected him to notice this little extra effort, but she did it anyway without so much as a word of thanks to encourage her or a word of regret to assert herself.

And then there was the time she bought me the ribbon that matched my sweater for school picture day. I did not ask her to buy the ribbon but she did it anyway because she thought she was doing something nice for me, for her only daughter. How could she

have known that I would be so ungrateful? How could she have foreseen my unappreciative outburst? She only thought she was doing something kind. I should only have said thank you that day.

Remember how I told you that I saw Amelia cry once? Believe it or not, the one and only time I saw her cry, her tears fell because of a man. But it wasn't over a romance or anything like that. Instead, Amelia cried for her father.

It all started when Amelia was very young. When she was only ten, her father left and never came back. He just told them one day that he was leaving and then walked out their back door. He made it all look so easy, walking out.

It was much more difficult for Amelia's mother to stay behind, though. She had a hard time accepting that her husband was really gone. It was hard because Amelia's father was a truck driver and always away for long stretches of time. It seemed natural, at first, not having him around. Like he was just out on another job. Almost like his goodbye had never really taken place.

And so, Amelia's mother could not make herself see the truth. Would not allow herself to deal with reality. In fact, she continued to try to convince Amelia that he would be back someday. But Amelia never believed her. She had seen her father go. She knew, in this case, he would keep his word.

As Amelia's mother kept hoping, the weeks turned into months and the months turned into years. Eventually everything became centered on his departure and much-anticipated return. Each time the doorbell echoed through their house, it became a symbol of hope bearing the promise of a long-awaited reunion. Likewise, each time the back door slammed shut, it was regarded as a painful reminder of his departure.

These things I am telling you now were not so directly told to me, but I know them to be true because I have seen the longing in Amelia's mother's eyes and I have heard Amelia's side of the story. But all the loneliness and denial and hope and hurt

finally came to a head one night when I was staying over at Amelia's. That night Amelia's mother got a phone call that changed all of that. I remember her mother came into Amelia's bedroom and told us that she had been talking to Amelia's aunt.

"Aunt Jenny in Denver called. Your father has been in an accident." Amelia's mother said with a voice that was a little shaky but still firm.

"So?"

"His truck turned over."

"Why the fuck should I care? It's not like I've seen him in the last five years or anything." Amelia snarled at her mother.

"He's dead, Amelia. Your father's dead."

Amelia grew strangely quiet. Usually Amelia has an answer for everything.

"The service is Tuesday. I'll have to ask for time off work. Maybe we could make a week of it and visit some of your cousins. Would you like that?" Her mother asked. As she spoke, she grew surprisingly calm.

Amelia didn't respond.

"Oh, I'll have to get my nice coat from the dry cleaner's. It's the only one I have that looks right with my black suit. You'll wear that dress I bought you last week, right?"

Still Amelia said nothing.

"Aunt Jenny said we could stay with her. I remember you used to just love going out to Aunt Jenny's."

"You bitch!" Amelia finally screamed to her mother's surprise. "Why did you tell me? Why did you tell me he was dead?"

That night as I watched the tears roll down Amelia's cheeks, I didn't know what to do or what to say to comfort her. As I watched her weep at her mother's feet, I only knew that I hated her father for leaving and for dying and for hurting her all those years.

Sometimes people confuse and hurt me so much that I think I will never understand or trust or love anyone. Sometimes I even think that I might as well stop trying to connect to anybody and I should just retreat into myself and forget about this life.

My last night with the boy with the Ford is a night I will never forget. I remember it looked like rain as he pulled his Ford into my driveway. We were going to have dinner and look at the stars – we often sat under the open night sky together making wishes and talking of our dreams. I was nervous when he arrived that night. I had this feeling that something was going to happen. I remember thinking that destinies would be shaped and everything would change in a flash. I distinctly recall thinking this just as the lightning lit up the sky. It started to sprinkle as I walked out to his car.

I remember riding with him that night, too. I wish I had known it was going to be the last time we were together in that Ford. I wish I had known it was going to be the last time we were together at all, for that matter. But I didn't so I just commented on the rain, talked about school, spoke of trivial things.

He spoke of the trivial as well as he parked the car at the edge of the field we always sat in when we went stargazing. I looked out the window as he said "Well, I guess we won't be looking at the stars tonight." I knew exactly what he meant as he said

these words. I have told you before that I always knew what he was really saying and feeling.

That night as the rain streamed down the windows of his Ford, he told me he was leaving and that he never wanted to look back. He was going away to college to make great things of his life. I remember thinking that he wasn't going to need stars anymore.

I knew then he wasn't leaving because he wanted to hurt me. And even though I still know this now, I continue to feel the pain of our goodbye. And I still can't look at the stars. Every time I try to go to that field, or even when I simply look up at the night sky, I can't see anything except the tears in his eyes, the rain drops running down the windows of his Ford, the lightning flashing over that big, empty field.

Sometimes it feels like the boy with the Ford left me alone. He left me and he took my wishes, too.

“If I could start again

A million miles away

I would keep myself

I would find a way”

— Nine Inch Nails

My mother and Amelia finally met the other day. For months my mother had been dying to invite Amelia for dinner and for months I had refused to allow my mother to get anywhere near her. I was certain my mother would embarrass me with her subservient nature and domestic hobbies, so I pushed her away each time she reminded she still hadn't met my friend. But when Amelia's book bag ripped one morning and I saw the distressed look on her face, I knew I had to give in and let my mother meet Amelia. I knew this because my mother is the only who could fix Amelia's bag.

The whole thing was pretty ironic really. I had always detested the way my mother dutifully sewed buttons back on shirts and patched up old jeans and I thought I would never want Amelia to see that part of her. But the day Amelia's bag ripped, I asked my mother to play “Suzie Homemaker” because of Amelia. In fact, I would have been disappointed if my mother hadn't been the good little housewife she is.

My mother, of course, gladly repaired the bag. She took it from my hands before I could even explain what I wanted her to do. Yes, she just smiled sweetly at Amelia and said, “I don't believe we've met, dear,” as she set up her sewing machine and got to work. Within minutes my mother had nearly fixed the tear and I felt grateful to her as I watched the needle move in and out of the bag's material.

Once the bag was finished, though, my first instinct was to hurry Amelia out the door. But before I could think of an excuse to leave, my eyes spotted the ribbons on the newly-mended bag and something inside me told me I should stay. As I looked at those ribbons, my mind raced back to the memory of my mother's tears and the cruel words I shouted at her on that school picture day. I knew then I needed to give my mother another chance just as she gives me chance after chance each day as she packs my lunches and darns my socks. So I told my mother Amelia and I would stay for dinner.

Telling Amelia that I love her will be the bravest thing I have ever done. I never said such things to the boy with the Ford. I have, of course, told my mother that I love her. That's just what mothers and daughters say to one another. But it has been a long time since I said those words out loud. I wonder if they will roll easily off my tongue when I see her and the time seems right. It would certainly feel good to say them again, this time with conviction and sincerity.

I found the ribbon my mother bought me for school picture day. I found it this morning when I was looking through my dresser drawers. It felt so soft under my fingers as I came upon it and lifted it out into the light of my room. That ribbon has been hidden away for so long. I wonder now if I should leave it somewhere for my mother to find. Would it only hurt her to see it again after all these years? Or would she understand that I was returning it to her as a symbol of truce?

I don't know how Amelia will respond when I tell her what I am going to say. I don't know what my mother will think when I leave the ribbon for her to find. But when you love someone, you have to let them know. I know this. As for the rest...

Tonight I snuck into my mother's bedroom and placed the red ribbon on her bedside table. As I walked back to my room, I peeked my head into the kitchen where she was drying dishes at the sink.

"Hey, Mom, thanks again for fixing Amelia's book bag. I hope it wasn't any trouble."

"It was no trouble at all. You know I like to sew. I'm just glad I could help."

"Well, you did. Amelia loves that bag. I don't know what she would have done without it."

And that's when my mother finally asked me, "Dear, what are the ribbons for?"

Elizabeth Greene

Memories

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

This is a real story. It is real to me, and it is all too real to you, Katherine T.

So no matter how much time passes,

no matter how much we pretend to forget,

no matter how much our lives change over the years,

a real story is what it will always be.

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

Back then you were so weak. But then again, so was I. We were young, really, rather than weak, so we were silenced. Children are to be seen and not heard, I guess. That was a long time ago, though. But I still remember your shiny red hair. It was always pulled tightly into a ponytail that flopped about your neck as we ran and played. I remember your freckles, too, dotting your face, hiding your fair white skin. Your skin was sunburned in the summer and white as snow in the winter. But, most of all, I remember your green eyes. They sparkled at me from across the room. They still sparkle at me now across time and distance.

But I'm starting to forget you, too. I've been forgetting for a while now, but I just recently realized how much I cannot recollect. Like how I no longer see the structure of your face. I can't be sure of the color of that fall jacket you always wore. What was your middle name? Did you have a soft laugh? I'm sure you did. It would have been right for you to have a quiet, demure little giggle. But maybe I'm wrong. I cannot recall.

Perhaps you had a big, booming strong laugh. It's quite possible it was a loud and happy and vociferous laugh. A laugh melodious and joyous. A regaling laugh. A laugh that made everyone around you laugh as well. But that can't be right. You were always so shy, so timid. Even fainthearted and backward at times. You never said much, never opened up much, and you certainly never let people see you cry. So it would only stand to reason that your laugh was private, too. Private and soft. Soft because you were soft. Soft because you wanted to go unnoticed. Soft because you weren't unnoticed. Soft because you were surely crying inside.

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

We were in the same class in fourth grade and we were friends. Best friends. I remember when I met you. It was during lunch one day. That big cafeteria was menacing to anyone who couldn't find others to sit with. But it was always especially menacing to you, shy, little Katherine T.

I remember you walked by me and I noticed you. I can't say exactly what I saw in you, but I knew with all my fourth grade wisdom that I was looking at a lost soul. A lost soul with red, red hair in a ponytail that flopped about her neck and freckles that dotted her whole face hiding her fair white skin.

"Do you want to sit with me?" I asked you.

"Okay," you said, still not looking me in the eye.

"I like your jacket," I said when you took the seat across from me.

"Thanks," you said with a reserve that could not be broken by my half-hearted compliment.

"Are you shy?"

"I guess."

"You shouldn't be shy," I told you with all the precocity of a person who has never known

what it meant to be shy in her whole life.

“I know.”

“It’s okay, though,” I said, “because I have a feeling there is something special about you.”

“What would make you say that?”

“Because I can see it in your eyes.”

“What do you see?” You asked and those green, green eyes glimmered with hope and interest.

“A sparkle.”

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

Your eyes were green -- are green -- green as the green, green grass. You run on the grass in my backyard. I see your back as I chase you. You are so elusive in so many ways. I see your red hair in a ponytail flopping about your neck. Your hair is free as it flies up behind you. I see your jacket blowing, I think it was blowing out away from your body, fluttering in the wind. It was purple. I see it fluttering in the cool breeze like kite tails following your every move. I see you darting behind my big oak tree. Green eyes sparkle at me and then disappear again behind rough, tough bark. You were forever hiding, Katherine T.

Come out, come out wherever you are.

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

Tears welling up in sparkling, green eyes.

Tears rolling down a freckled face that always cries.

I wonder now if you ever screamed out loud.

For once was your quiet voice strong and proud?

Or did you only whisper in inaudible fright?

Voicing your protests silently into the wild night.

Did you hang your innocent head in shame,

Assuming the awful guilt they should claim?

Or did you glare at them with your eyes narrow and hard?

Those sparkling green eyes that danced when you laughed.

Can you still laugh now?

I wonder how.

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

I remember the day my mother told me about your sorrow. I was sitting on my bed reading when she peeked her head into my room. I remember the look of concern in her eyes. I remember how she said to me "I have some bad news." I remember wanting to get back to my book. I remember that I nodded to her anyway, signaling to her that she could enter, even though all I really wanted to do was read. I remember hearing my mother use a gentler, quieter voice as she sat down on my bed and sighed, "It's Katherine."

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

A warm hand slowly reaching out.

You're my best friend, you know?

A clammy hand finding mine so cool.

Is it already time to go?

A burning hand so anxious and hot.

I don't like to be at home.

A sweaty palm waving goodbye.

I'll see you later -- I should have known.

To Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

I felt numb as my mother told me about what they had done to you. Numb like you must have become to survive it all. But, after the numbness, I felt incredible guilt. I felt guilty because I was glad it wasn't me. Guilty because it wasn't me. Guilty because I could have been Katherine T.

I remember, too, my mother's voice as she spoke of the horrible news. It was so soft it almost reminded me of yours. She told me, "Katherine's two step brothers have been hurting her."

"What do you mean?"

For Katherine T, wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

Sometimes bad things happen to good people.

We have to have evil in this world so that we can appreciate the good.

God doesn't ever give us more than we can bear.

These are the things I keep telling myself as I think about you. These are the things that don't console me as I think about what they did. There is no way anyone will ever be able to explain it to me so that it makes sense. There is no way I will ever understand it. And there is no way I will ever accept it.

But I am being selfish now because I am not the one who has to try to learn to trust again and forget about the pain. I am only the one who had to hear the news. I am not the shy, quiet Katherine T. I am only the one who befriended her because of the sparkle in her green, green eyes.

And what ever became of those green eyes? After I found out about you, your story, I never saw you again. No one really knew where you had gone for sure. No one really seemed to be concerned with that. The only thing people would talk about was what *they* did to you. But I

didn't care about them. I cared only about you. I didn't want to hear anymore about what had happened to Katherine T. I wanted to know what *happened* to Katherine T. Where did you go, Katherine? Where are you now?

For Katherine T., wherever you are, I hope that you are stronger now.

I almost forgot you once but I will never forget you again. Now that I have written this, I will forever remember you. I will forever remember your shiny red ponytail, your fair white skin, your sparkling green eyes. I will remember your story and your sorrow. While I will probably never know what became of you, I can still continue to have hope for you. And I do have hope. I hope that wherever you are, Katherine T., you are stronger now.

This is a real story. It is real to me, and it is all too real to you, Katherine T. So no matter how much time passes, no matter how much we pretend to forget, no matter how much our lives change over the years, a real story is what it will always be.

Elizabeth Greene

Hiding

Rachel couldn't understand why Luke couldn't understand.

This was the first time they had ever failed to see eye to eye. Since the day she met Luke when she was only eight, they had always been able to read one another perfectly. It was almost uncanny how much they could sense about each other. It just seemed natural and easy for her to know what Luke was going to do or say next. And Luke, in turn, effortlessly finished her sentences and shared her innermost thoughts. Maybe she had taken this aspect of their relationship for granted, assuming it would always be possible. But it just didn't seem right the way their ability to stay constantly in sync had vanished in one night. In an instant, things had changed. Now he only expressed confusion about her actions and never seemed to comprehend her words. Anymore, Luke just looked at her like she was speaking a foreign language.

Luke felt it, too. He felt her slipping away. For more than eight years she had been his playmate, best friend, and biggest fan, but now he couldn't reach her. She was like a stranger to him. He wondered how their relationship had changed so drastically. Luke told himself he didn't know. He pretended he didn't remember that night. But, the truth is, he couldn't forget it. The truth was the night he stopped understanding Rachel haunted him. His disappointment still as real as it had been that night. His pain as bitter as ever.

Every night before Luke went to sleep, he replayed the events of that night in his head. It was his fifteenth birthday and he, Rachel, and some of their closest friends had gone camping. It was their tradition. They had camped out every year since he met Rachel, and every year the trip went the same way. He and Rachel packed up an excessive amount of camping gear, his mother made an excessive amount of food, and everyone hiked out to the farthest corner of Luke's backyard to enjoy a night under the stars. The trips were always magical because they always turned into a bonding experience for the two of them. Inevitably, he and Rachel withdrew from the rest of the group because of some pointless drama or new adventure. And during their special seclusions, their friendship grew stronger.

But the night of Luke's fifteenth birthday was anything but magical. Instead, everything went wrong. That night, he and Rachel had a huge fight. Luke actually yelled at her in front of everyone. And after he was done shouting, Rachel stormed off and Luke didn't even try to follow her. That was what made Luke shiver every time he remembered it. Every time he thought about that night, he wondered why he hadn't gone after her. He saw her leaving him and wished he could go back in time and tell her he was sorry, tell her he would try harder to understand.

But Luke didn't think just about their fight before he went to sleep each night. Instead, every day his eyes spotted her in the cafeteria, he remembered that hurt look on her face. Whenever his mouth impulsively smiled at her in the hallway, his ears rang with the hateful tone he had directed at her. And, worst of all, any time her tried to gather the courage to call her on the telephone, his heart swelled up with that lingering pain.

Rachel had her memories too. She remembered the disaster between them at Luke's fifteenth birthday party, but she remembered other nights too. One night they shared was the best of her life. It was the night of her first kiss.

Packing things up with Luke on his thirteenth birthday, she could almost feel something coming. She didn't know exactly what to expect, but she knew wonderful events were going to find her. Find them. As they gathered up their things, her heart fluttered every time she looked at Luke. She didn't know what was happening to her, but she was drunk with a sensation she had never experienced before. His familiar smell, his easy laughter, his friendly nudges and playful shoves seemed more acute, more meaningful, more something couldn't quite name.

That night she had hoped he didn't notice her dreamy mood although she knew he probably did. Nothing she tried to hide ever got by him. Like the time she pretended she wasn't scared when everyone was telling ghost stories at his tenth birthday party. He knew she was afraid and she knew he knew. In fact, she would have been disappointed if he hadn't known. His ability to detect her every thought and feeling let her know he cared about her. As he rescued her from the spooky stories, she felt sheer relief. She was reassured he was still her best friend.

The night of Luke's thirteenth birthday, he became more than just a friend, though. He became her dream. They were in the middle of a game of flashlight tag hiding in their favorite place, the spot that had concealed them for five straight years. Every year Luke and Rachel stumped them all as they hid holding their breath behind the coat racks in Luke's father's old shed. And every year the others begged them to reveal

the mystery of their whereabouts as they promised one another they would never say a word.

That night they found their hiding place once again and were quietly waiting for their turn to seek when Rachel felt herself moving towards Luke. Before she knew what was happening, her lips found his among the dusty coats. Once she realized what she had done, she pulled away. But then, to her amazement, Luke kissed her back. It was like they were playing their own private game of tag as they returned one another's kisses quickly and carefully yet excitedly.

But soon the two grew more decisive as they pushed the coats aside and reached out for one another in the darkness. Luke found her first and pressed up against her. Rachel slipped off her gloves and put her hands on his face. She couldn't see him as they embraced, but she could feel his warm tongue in her mouth. As Luke's hands caressed her hair, face, and neck, Rachel felt a strange and wonderful combination of love and lust for her old friend. That was still the best night of Rachel's life.

Her worst night was the night she fought with Luke on his fifteenth birthday. He hurt her because he did not understand her that night. Unlike every other night of their eight-year friendship, Luke had not been able to feel what she felt or know what she knew. She could forgive him for yelling at her. She could forgive him for not running after her. But she couldn't forgive him for his failure to understand her. That, in Rachel's mind, was unforgivable.

As Luke watched Rachel quietly taking her algebra test, he wondered what she was thinking. Probably just formulas and numbers. But maybe she was thinking of him.

He was definitely thinking of her and, for the first time in his life, he was scared he was going to lose her. He was so scared, he couldn't concentrate on his exam.

He began to remember the night of his tenth birthday party. Everyone was telling ghost stories around the fire. Well, all the boys were, anyway. He started them off with his bone-chilling rendition of the chainsaw murderer. From there, the tales grew more graphic and Rachel grew more afraid. He loved to hear a good scary story, but he could feel the tension in Rachel's body as she huddled up beside him. He knew she was scared when he turned to her and told her they could leave the circle, but she masked her fear with an unconvincing laugh. A minute later, she grabbed his hand and he saw the tears welling up in her eyes.

He loved that about Rachel. He loved the way she tried to be strong and he loved the way she needed him to rescue her. As he led her away to his father's shed and those friendly, old coats, he felt strong and brave. He felt like her hero as he helped her hide from the world behind the jackets and scarves. Back then Luke thought he would always know how to save Rachel. Protecting her had been so easy all those years ago.

But Luke also liked the way Rachel seemed to be able to read his thoughts. Like the night of his thirteenth birthday. When she kissed him, it was like she was rescuing him. He had felt trapped inside for so long, dying to kiss her, dying to hold her next to him. For so long he had wanted to make his move and hadn't been able to find the courage. So when she was brave enough to kiss him, it was like something exploded inside. She freed him in a way no one else could and the energy he derived from her courage surged through his body as he returned her kiss with one of his own.

He wondered now if she remembered that night with the same fondness he did. He could only wonder though because he was too afraid to ask.

Luke decided to approach Rachel after school. He found her at her locker and tried to seem calm.

“Hey, you,” he said.

“Hey,” Rachel returned steadily.

“I was hoping we could talk.”

“What about?”

“I don’t know. Just, you know, talk like we used to,” Luke said feeling a rejection coming on.

“Okay, but I don’t know if I have a lot of time.”

“So how have you been anyway, Rachel?”

“Fine I guess.”

As Luke and Rachel stood together talking, they both felt a wave of familiarity mixed with hesitation and anxiety. While the two seemed ready to move forward, their hearts clung to the past and their minds raced back to that awful night months ago.

For Rachel, things had been building up for quite some time. While her decision that night may have seemed rash, it was actually the result of months of frustration and confusion. She wasn’t angry with Luke. In fact, she didn’t really know what she felt, so the night of the party she tried to shrug it off. She decided whatever was bothering her

would surely be made right after the camping trip. Their camping trips were always good for their friendship. Why would this one be any different?

So she pretended nothing was wrong and attempted to muster the excitement she usually felt on Luke's birthday as she helped pack their things and made the hike out to the campsite. It even felt like old times for a while as they began to play flashlight tag and she and Luke ran together towards their hiding place in the shed.

But once they arrived and she positioned herself behind the coats, she felt strangely claustrophobic. After a few minutes, she was scared and struggling for air as she tried not to breath in the dust. But the more she told herself to stay calm, the more it seemed as though the musty jackets were closing in around her and Luke's body was blocking her only means of escape. Gasping for air, Rachel pushed Luke aside and tripped into the open doorway of the shed.

As she breathed in the night air, she could hear Luke whispering to her to come back. But she couldn't make herself obey. Her body refused to return to him and their safe place. Instead she froze in the frame of the doorway until one of Luke's friends from history class tagged her and then spotted Luke behind the coats. What followed was a confused, chaotic mess. As more of their friends gathered amazed that the once-mysterious hiding spot had been discovered, Luke yanked the coats away and went over to her.

"What were you thinking?" he asked, more confused than angry.

"I don't know." Rachel answered. "I felt trapped."

"What do you mean 'trapped'?"

“I don’t know what I mean but I couldn’t stay back there anymore. Besides, it’s only a stupid game,” she yelled before she could stop herself.

“Well, I’m sorry if this is too childish for you but it means something to me,” he yelled at her with a viciousness she had never seen in him before.

“I didn’t mean it like that, Luke. I just got scared.”

“Why would you be afraid? We’ve come here a million times before.”

Then Rachel emotionally shut down. As he paced around her searching her face for an answer, she stared at him blankly.

“You gave away our hiding place,” he whispered as the others watched the old friends fight back tears.

“I’m sorry. I can’t explain it. Like I said, I just felt trapped,” she said and then walked away.

As she left him standing there, she wondered if he would come after her. She didn’t even know if she cared. As he watched her walk away, he wondered if his body would start running toward her. He was surprised when he finally realized she was no longer in sight and he hadn’t moved.

As Luke talked to Rachel in the hallway after school, he remembered the night she inexplicably stumbled out from behind the coats. It made him feel uncomfortable as he stood beside her because he couldn’t read her thoughts or understand her actions then and he certainly could not predict what was going to happen next with her now. All he could do was listen.

“I was thinking about going to the basketball game,” he told her, not knowing why.

“I’m not sure if I want to go or not.”

“Me either,” Luke said as he stared at the row of lockers behind her.

“You’ve run out of things to say already, haven’t you?” she said.

Luke admitted that he had and blushed until he saw Rachel’s face twist into a little grin.

“You’re teasing me,” he said with a smile. “I can’t believe you!”

“You can’t believe me. I can’t believe you, Mr. ‘Yeah, I think I’m going to the game tonight.’ You hate basketball.”

“I know. But somebody had to break the ice.”

“I suppose,” she said and then they both got quiet again.

Awkwardly, they walked down the long hallway in silence. As Luke opened the door for her, Rachel toyed with the idea of telling him she had things to do and needed to hurry home. Instead her mouth told him, “Walk me home. We can talk some more.”

“Or we could just stare at our feet and not say anything.”

“We could. If you want to.”

“I don’t,” Luke said quickly, almost too quickly.

The two grew quiet again until Rachel asked, “Do you remember your eighth birthday party when we camped out for the first time?”

“Yes.”

“That was when we found our hiding spot in the shed.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You were the one who thought of the shed,” Rachel hesitated, “and it was your idea to hide behind the coats.”

“I remember.”

“And I tried to get you to hide somewhere else and you said no. You wouldn’t budge and finally I gave in because you told me it would be our special place.”

“So?” Luke asked trying not to sound perturbed. He felt like Rachel was trying to accuse him of something, trying to take the magic away from their secret hideaway. As he wondered what she was going to throw at him next, Rachel suddenly stopped walking and grabbed his hand.

“It was our place, wasn’t it?” she asked as her eyes pleaded with his.

Luke couldn’t say anything. He didn’t know what to say or do.

“But then we grew up.”

That night as he entered the high school gymnasium, his eyes immediately found Rachel. As he eagerly walked towards her, he could see her amazement when she spotted him.

“You came,” she said. “I can’t believe it!”

“I know. Neither can I. But I didn’t come to watch the game.”

“Then why did you come?” she laughed. “Surely not for little ole me.”

“You’re always teasing me. Maybe I’ll just go.”

“No, I’m sorry. I want you to stay.”

“Okay, then I’ll stay,” Luke said and sat down beside her.

There was a long silence as the two watched the team run out onto the court.

“It’s going to be weird between us for a while, isn’t it?”

“Probably,” Luke said as he put his hand on her cheek.

“I was afraid of that,” she sighed.

“Don’t be.”

Afterword

This project is the product of twenty-two years of difficult and rewarding work. Yes, this thesis required several months of brainstorming, creating, and writing. It also called for many weeks of revising, proofreading, and perfecting. But beyond all of that, my thesis demanded a different kind of “work.” Indeed, years of growing, laughing, crying, learning, teaching, hurting, healing, succeeding, and failing went into this project. In short, twenty-two years of the labors of life made this thesis possible.

When I approached my thesis in August, I knew those twenty-two years of experiences and emotions would inevitably seep into this project. At first, this prospect made me anxious as I worried that my own my fears, joys, dreams, and sorrows would consume my work and prevent me from effectively reaching my readers. But as the months went by and the memories oozed out of my pen and into the text, I realized that my past was shaping my stories. Indeed the personal experiences and feelings I thought would only weaken my work were instead anchoring it. I know now my memories guided and strengthened my stories because they helped me craft scenes that capture the trials and triumphs of adolescence. Moreover, they enlivened and personalized my pieces because they allowed me to create characters with all the complexities of today’s adolescents.

While my work on this thesis gave me a wonderful opportunity to reminisce on my middle and high school years, more importantly it served as a vehicle for exploring the causes closest to my heart. First, this project has given me the chance to explore the emotional battles, social complexities, and intellectual challenges that accompany

adolescence. After years of teaching and observing adolescents, I believe that young women and men deserve all the support we can give them during this awkward and crucial time of life. Through these stories, I hope to give adolescents the empathy and encouragement they so desperately need as they share Amelia's pain over her absent father's and experience the intoxication of a first kiss with Rachel and Luke.

Second, this thesis has more specifically allowed me to examine and wrestle with the struggles and pressures female adolescents must face and conquer. While American girls enjoy freedoms their mothers and grandmothers never knew, they also must grapple with decisions, consequences, and risks unique to their generation. It is my wish that these stories will comfort and empower young women as they encounter the confusion and pain that often comes with adolescence. I sincerely hope female readers will find comfort with the girl who does not want to be like everyone else and solace through Beth's memories of Katherine T.

While this thesis is deeply-rooted in my personal memories, other writers also influenced my works. As I wrote and revised, I often turned to the pages of Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* for guidance. That novel is the standard by which I measure my own modest pieces because of its honesty and feeling. Likewise, *The Quest for Christa T.* by Christa Wolf directly inspired the tones of "Everyone Else Around Here" and "Memories." Reading Wolf's work allowed me to find my own voice and style. And, finally, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher helped along the themes and subject matter of my stories because of its fascinating presentation of many diverse young women.

While my stories are far from perfect, they are more than I ever thought they could be. I am especially proud of the ways in which “Everyone Else Around Here” has evolved from an awkward experiment into a moving tale of love, pain, and coming of age. This piece allowed me to find my voice as I tweaked and toyed with its rhythm and sentence structure. Likewise, “Hiding” and “What are the ribbons for?” gave me a chance to reach a different audience as I developed unique characters with problems and fears I have never personally experienced. Through these stories, I was able to explore the challenges associated with forging a sexual identity, maintaining friendships, and finding female role models. Finally, “Memories” gave me a forum to remember an old friend and address the horrors of sexual abuse and rape. As I developed Beth’s story, I had the chance to rekindle feelings I had shut away long ago.

Although this thesis is the result of twenty-two years of work, I know it is merely a tentative project. Yes, as I prepare myself for graduation and many more years of living, I plan to continue my “work” on these stories and many others. I only hope my toils will embolden and encourage young women and men as they too live and learn throughout adolescence.